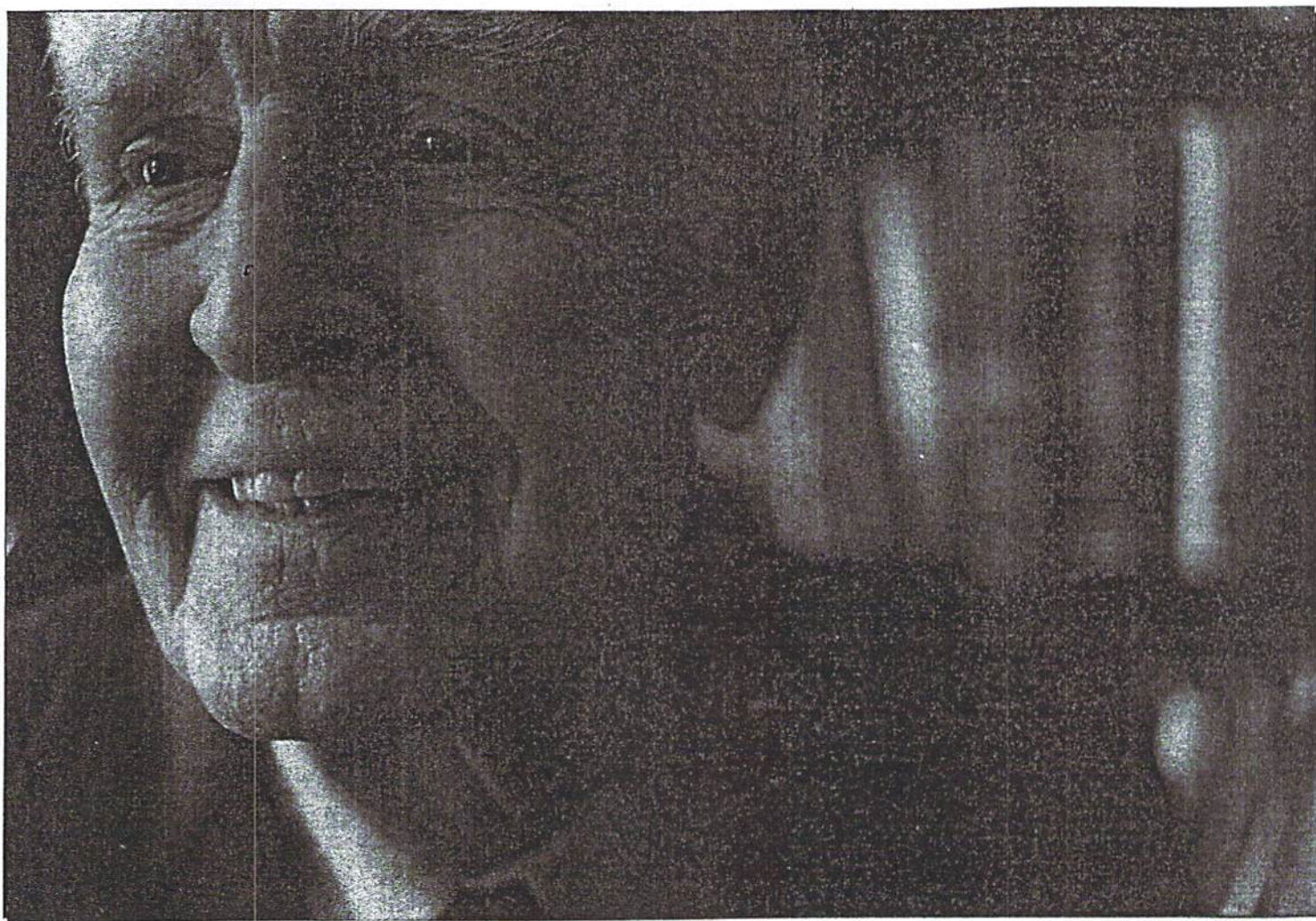


PEOPLE - KELLY

# The Villagers thrive on their wordiness:

## WORDY WINNERS



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / DOMINIC CHAVEZ

Pat Kelly, 84, of the Duxbury spelling bee champions trio, was deemed a "ringer" – he was a national bee finalist at age 10.



People - Kelly

# Villagers enjoy sweet spell of success

By Jeff McLaughlin  
GLOBE STAFF

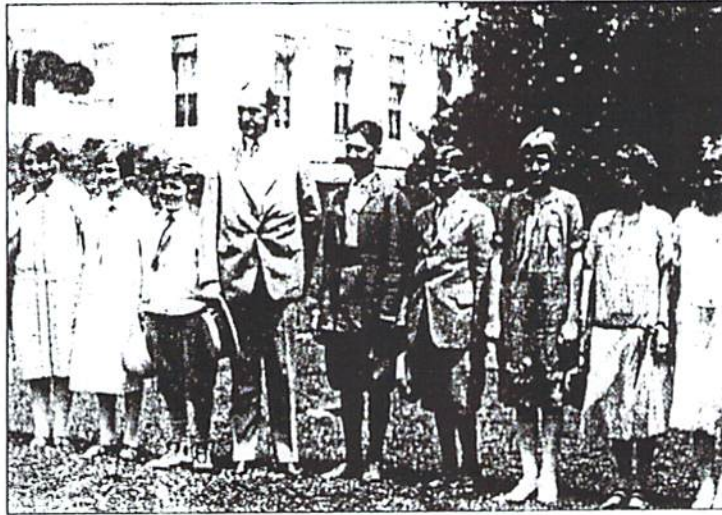
**D**UXBURY — The English language, a playful expert once wrote, is "an olio of orthological oddities."

That's the ivory tower version. Bargain-basement translation: English is a complicated stew, and thrown into the pot are a great many words that hardly anyone knows how to spell.

But don't count the Venerable Villagers of Duxbury in the ranks of the orthologically challenged: Pat Kelly, 84, Delia Briggs, 81, and Mary Ennis, 77, can correctly spell just about any word thrown at them — and they proved it this month at the Duxbury Education Foundation's first annual charity spelling bee.

"When we won," said Kelly, "there were kids coming up to us asking for autographs. Can you believe it?"

And back at The Village of Duxbury, an independent living facility with 157 resident seniors, the three are heroes.



President Calvin Coolidge invited finalists of the first national spelling bee to the White House in 1925. Pat Kelly is to his left.

"There's still a buzz about the bee, you'll pardon me saying," said Kelly.

Ennis said, "The spirit here is amazing. First of all, we had 30 or more rooters who came over from The Village for the contest, and they made a lot of noise. And now it's not, 'You won,' it's 'WE won.'"

Even before the last round, some of the teams that had been

beaten out began cheering for the Villagers, Briggs noted, among them the Bodacious Loquacious Librarians and the Spell Doctors.

Like the Villagers, most of the other 52 three-person teams vying for the top spot had won intermediate competitions to get to the community-wide finals, which raised \$16,000 for the sponsoring educational foundation. The en-

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PAT KELLY  
Member of winning spelling bee team, the Venerable Villagers of Duxbury

trants ranged from smart-as-a-whip schoolchildren to doctorate-degree-lugging squads of scientists from the Battelle labs.

But when all was said and done it was the Villagers who defeated all comers.

The autograph-seeking kids, members of the vanquished teams, indeed any parent, teacher-

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*'We all had Latin in school, that was expected in our day. Latin is a tremendous base for any study of English, whether spelling or meanings of words.'*

MARY ENNIS, 77, of the Venerable Villagers of Duxbury, champion spelling bee team

*People - Kelly*

## ■ SPELLING

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er, or cultural critic might well give some consideration to how the Venerable Villagers became spelling wizards.

"We all had Latin in school, that was expected in our day," said Ennis, who was reared in England and moved to the United States in 1946 after marrying an American serviceman from Lexington. "Latin is a tremendous base for any study of English, whether spelling or meanings of words."

A trace of her native Bristol still spices Ennis's speech. "I was a war bride," she said with a smile, using a once-common description. She was also a medical-text proofreader, having launched that career in her 60s. She worked at the job well into her 70s, even commuting daily for the first couple of years after she moved into The Village.

"You get familiar with technical terms in a job like that," said Ennis. "But really it's more that I was always a reader."

"And we're all voracious readers to this day," added Briggs, who was born in upstate New York but lived for many years in Concord and then Plymouth before moving to The Village five years ago.

Self-described as "a wife, mother, and teacher, in that order," Briggs firmly believes that spelling and other aspects of the language arts should be taught rigorously, with memorization in the mix, and reading should be emphasized practically from birth.

Briggs regularly reads poetry, a lot of biographies and fiction, plus "the New Yorker cover-to-cover every week, the Atlantic Monthly, really anything interesting." She's as comfortable reading French or Spanish as English, and is a key vol-

unteer in the well-stocked library at The Village, where last week's interview took place.

All three are fans of the literate programs broadcast on National Public Radio, and especially of shows devoted to language lovers, including "Says You." Television was never mentioned, though the trio are by no means averse to technology that didn't come along until they were mature adults - Ennis and Briggs in particular are comfortable with computers, conversing regularly via e-mail with children and grandchildren overseas.

Kelly added two more ingredients in the Villagers' spelling-bee formula: "We all are serious fans of the hard crossword puzzles, like the Sunday New York Times, so we run into odd words a lot that way," he said. "And, truthfully, we also had the time to practice before the contest."

All three are quick to say that they don't want to give the impression that they are reclusive nerds who never take their noses out of books.

"People here have a lot of fun together," said Briggs.

Some residents, like the trio, are widows or widowers, but some couples also move into the facility eager to trade isolated home ownership for a kind of coop-apartment style ownership that doesn't carry with it shoveling snow or fixing drainpipes.

"One of the reasons I was willing to talk about the spelling bee was I saw a chance to give a plug to where we live," said Ennis. "It's not what people think it is, this new kind of



# People - Kelly

residence, it's not a nursing home at all."

The trio finished one-two-three in a preliminary spelling bee for individuals at The Village. Ennis was número uno, and so was designated team captain as they prepared for the charity final.

Kelly, a retired lawyer for an insurance company, said the trio met five times for two-hour sessions in the two weeks before the final, testing each other on the 3,400 words listed in the learning aid put out annually by the Scripps-Howard publishing group, which is a resource for spelling bees nationwide. Not many Duxbury contest words came from that list, as it turned out, but the mental exercise was good, they agreed.

For Kelly, winning spelling bees is very old hat. He was 10 years old and living in New Haven when he was a finalist in the first nationwide spelling competition. The year was 1925 and he had his picture taken for the New York Times with other finalists and President Calvin Coolidge.

"My granddaughter has it that I won the whole shooting match, and Cal Coolidge was in the audience when I did and he came up and pinned a medal on me," said Kelly, his eyes twinkling.

He said there were mock cries from beaten Duxbury competitors that he was a "ringer" when his past spelling bee accomplishments emerged. "But think about how many words have been added to English since then," he said firmly, "especially all the scientific and technical terms. It was much much easi-

er back then. I remember I beat one kid when I spelled propeller right, with an 'e' at the end, and he had an 'o.' Now the words are much harder."

Earlier in the interview, each Villager had referred to the Scripps-Howard word-list document with a word that sounded something like pa-dee-ya, and when their interviewer asked how to spell that, the answer came in chorus: P-A-I-D-E-I-A, an aid to learning.

But when the subject turned to an example of a *really* hard word – much harder than the 74-year-old challenge of "propeller" – a head-scratcher emerged that sparked a lively conversation.

Pronounced "ice-a-go-gee," and meaning a formal introduction, it certainly was an introduction to how these three sharp minds work. Considering Latin and then Greek roots first, then musing about precise nuances of meanings, they settled on two possible spellings: "isogogy" and "isagoge."

Then Briggs took charge. "It's i-s-a, leading into, not i-s-o, which would mean identical," she said resolutely. "And I'm very sure there's no 'y' even though it sounds like it should be there. So it's i-s-a-g-o-g-e."

That was their answer.

Does the reader have an opinion?

You could look it up in a good dictionary.

Or just trust the Venerable Villagers. Either way, the answer is the same.